

Paris: Still Doing It De Gaulle's Way

Fourth of a Series

By Jim Hoagland

Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS—French intelligence services have routinely undertaken covert operations in foreign countries, been involved in the assassination of opponents and conducted internal spying on political dissidents since World War II, according to published accounts of former French operatives and to interviews with French and foreign experts on the intelligence community here.

Many of the French exploits have become well-known through leaks to the press and through highly partisan accounts written by disgruntled agents hoping to clear their own names or to turn a profit with a sensationalized best seller.

But there has been nothing comparable here to the U.S. Senate's attempt to delineate publicly the political responsibility for the kinds of sins laid at the door of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency.

There have been internal housecleanings at lower levels after some of the more spectacular French failures, but they have been carried out quietly, if at times brutally, and always with the top figures of the regime carefully insulated from the repercussions.

An important layer of the insulation consists of the multiplicity of French intelligence operations. At least four different groups in France carry out the kinds of operations that have brought the CIA and FBI under sharp criticism in the United States.

The proliferation grew up under Gen. Charles de Gaulle, who encouraged security services that "paralleled" government agencies and were loyal only to him and not to the formal bureaucracy. Faced at different times with serious threats of civil war

Other Cloaks, Other Daggers---IV

from both left and right, De Gaulle did not want a concentration of power in any one security service. Yet he was not one to pay attention to the details of the daily operation of government.

In wartime De Gaulle's followers got into the habit of not placing too fine a point on the legal niceties. The Free French movement based in London was constantly on the lookout for double agents slipping across the English Channel from Nazi-occupied France to join the Gaullist resistance movement. A number of bodies of presumed double agents were dug up at one point from the cellar of a London building used by the Free French. In the interest of allied unity, the scandal of unofficial French justice having been meted out on British soil was hushed up.

Even after the war, at least some of the Gaullist operatives seemed to have maintained the attitude that they were outside the law, and Gen. de Gaulle did little to disabuse them of that notion.

De Gaulle's successors, the late Georges Pompidou and France's current president, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, moved to centralize important intelligence functions. Giscard has sharply curtailed the freewheeling activities of fringe operatives who mixed intelligence with drug smuggling, vice and gangland rivalries.

Under Giscard, the 2,000-man French equivalent of the CIA, the service of external documentation and counterespionage, whose French acronym is SDECE, has become more professionalized and is cooperating more closely with the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies than under De Gaulle.

The French services are also putting more of their resources into straight commercial and economic espionage and monitoring of Communist country communications and movements, and sharply deemphasizing their once paramount political role in former French colonies in Africa, according to French

"Under Giscard, there is a much more realistic approach to what a small service can do, and a much more hardheaded economic approach to what French interests abroad are," says one foreign expert. "The days of intervening directly in Africa for sentiment or the glory of France seem to be over."

But Africa and compartmentalization are still important elements of French covert operations.

SDECE, with Giscard's evident approval, is now cooperating, for example, with the CIA and Zaire's President Mobutu Sese Seko by channeling arms and money to Holden Roberto's National Front for the Liberation of Angola, according to French, African and diplomatic sources.

French support without any official government imprimatur is also going directly to the much smaller liberation front for the Cabinda enclave, known as FLEC, based in Gabon. The support, said to consist of money, arms and the promise to recruit mercenaries, is widely believed here to be directed by Jacques Foccart, once De Gaulle's chief operative on Africa and the reputed boss of France's dirty tricks sector under both De Gaulle and Pompidou.

The two largely independent operations represent more than the kind of routine covering of bets that intelligence services often make.

SDECE's interests in Angola seem to be largely strategic, although there is a healthy dose of economic self-interest involved. The French share American concern about the spread of Communism and Soviet influence in Africa, and are interested in building their influence in Zaire and maintaining it in South Africa, which is also helping the National Front and its ally UNITA.

Foccart's operation is believed, however, to have major commercial implications. It is said to be largely financed by the sizable private treasury Foccart can put together from French companies with interests in

Gabon, with an eye on Cabinda's oil reserves, or with outstanding political or other debts for Foccart's help during the De Gaulle and Pompidou days. It is a graphic demonstration of the personalization of power by the Gaullists outside the channels of government.

Foccart, 64, was elbowed out of his job as presidential adviser shortly after Giscard was elected in 1974 and now runs a large export-import company here. His network of informants and operatives is still largely intact, although diplomats report that the apparatus no longer receives any substantial amount of government money.

The post-World War II history of France's intelligence services has been stained by repeated scandal, internal intrigue and cooperation with criminal elements that makes the known CIA links to the Mafia look small. But no political body here has had the independence or strength to run a full-scale inquiry similar to the Senate intelligence committee's report on the CIA.

Such a body would also have extreme difficulty in coming up with documents or witnesses. Foccart carted off several truckloads of documents after the deaths of De Gaulle and Pompidou and some of the key figures in scandals brought to public light have died violent deaths.

The four major French intelligence services are:

1.—SDECE founded after World War II with help from American intelligence, the service is known as the "swimming pool" by the French because of the proximity of its headquarters to the Tourelles swimming pool on the outskirts of Paris.

The service is formally part of the ministry of defense but has a direct line of communication to the presidency through one of Giscard's advisers and coordinates closely with Giscard's interior minister, Michel Poniatowski. Like De Gaulle's interior ministers, Poniatowski is probably the key man in security and intelligence policy decisions.

continued

The service's 2,000 force has an official budget of about \$25 million a year, but experts say that it can draw on \$50 million hidden elsewhere in the budget in any given year. Agents' expense accounts are reportedly severely scrutinized by finance ministry officials delegated to the swimming pool.

Most of its agents abroad appear to operate under diplomatic cover as military attaches in embassies. In the past, much of their work has been confined to traditional intelligence-gathering, while covert operations were left to Foccart's network.

The service maintains that it only operates abroad. But a secret SDECE report obtained by The Washington Post shows SDECE surveillance of French dissidents and foreign leftists in France and what appears to be routine distribution of such reports to the ministry of the interior, the national police and the interior ministry's domestic counterespionage agency.

The May 1972 report concerns meetings in Toulouse, between French intellectuals and leftists from Cuba, Brazil and Uruguay identified by the service as Communist agents.

Reflecting a deep-rooted French distrust of secret services, governments here have avoided naming professional spies to head SDECE. High-ranking military men, whose disputes with their career cloak and dagger deputies have produced much of the information that has leaked out about the service, have usually held the post.

Pompidou appointed the aristocratic Col. Alexandre de Marenches, 55, in 1970 to clean up and revitalize the service, shaken by discovery of serious Communist infiltration, the linking of some of its agents to drug smuggling and the purge. De Gaulle ordered after SDECE's role in helping arrange the 1965 kidnaping in Paris that led to the presumed murder of Moroccan dissident Mehdi Ben Barka became public knowledge. That operation was apparently a return favor to the Moroccan secret services in return for past favors rendered.

SDECE itself routinely carried out assassinations of gun runners and Algerian rebels during the Algerian revolt, according to former SDECE agents.

reminiscent of CIA discussions on how to kill Lumumba and Castro, one agent has described how the service considered eliminating a gun runner named Marcel Leopold by poisoning the milk bottles on his doorstep or sending him a bomb in a book (both rejected because they might harm the target's family) before doing him in with a poison dart from a blowgun fashioned out of a bicycle pump.

The service's former top liaison man with the CIA in Washington, Philippe Thyraud de Vosjoli, claims in a book published in Canada last month that a committee headed by Pompidou, then De Gaulle's prime minister, approved plans to have SDECE assassinate foreign leaders, including Sekou Toure of Guinea and Habib Bourguiba of Tunisia during the 1960s. Both men are still in power.

Vosjoli was forced to leave the service after becoming too close to the CIA for De Gaulle's liking.

De Marenches has been able to reestablish fairly good working relations with the American agency, according to French and foreign sources. CIA Deputy Director Vernon Walters reportedly praised SDECE in Paris for its cooperation during the Vietnam peace talks here.

The portly De Marenches has also intensified commercial spying. A French source who usually offers no compliments to the service, says that the French were kept fully informed of secret American negotiating proposals during this year's "deal of the century," when American and French manufacturers competed to sell jet fighters to four smaller European nations.

De Marenches is concentrating on recruiting graduates of France's most prestigious universities to fill lower level vacancies and has brought military men into the top ranks of the service's operational branches to exert more control.

2.—The Directorate of Territorial Surveillance comes under Poniatowski's direct control and handles counterespionage inside France. There is strong evidence that the DST taps the phones of the embassies not only of all Communist nations, but also of Israel, key former

"We know our phones are tapped," said a diplomat at the embassy where electronic tests have been run.

The DST was also implicated in an attempt to tap the offices of France's leading satirical newspaper, Le Canard Enchaîné, which has published exposes on the French police, intelligence, arms dealings and other sensitive subjects.

The DST turned over to Foccart's network lists of suspected dissidents in Marseilles, Grenoble and Lyons during the upheavals of May 1968 as part of a plan to round up and intern potential troublemakers in soccer stadiums or camps, according to unrefuted documents published by the French press last year.

Indications have emerged recently that the source of those documents was a former journalist named Dominique Calzi, who says he was a member of Foccart's "parallel" police and was able to make off with copies of many of its documents.

Calzi, who was jailed on longstanding charges shortly after the leaks about the DST lists appeared, published his own account last month of that incident and of more than a dozen other major scandals, accusing Foccart's men of the Ben Barka kidnaping, gold and drug smuggling, the kidnaping in West Germany of Col. Antoine Argoud, a top leader of the military men who rebelled against De Gaulle over Algeria, and of murdering African exile leader Felix Moumnie in Geneva in 1960.

3.—The Civil Action Service is the formal name of Foccart's network, known by its French initials, SAC, or more popularly as "Les Barbouzes" (the false beards).

According to Calzi and other French sources, Foccart built his network out of the strong-arm "order" section of De Gaulle's postwar political movement, the authoritarian-inclined Rally of the French People. Originally conceived by De Gaulle and Foccart as a means to infiltrate the state services and prepare the way for taking power, the unofficial service grew rapidly during the Algerian war and became the chief instrument of dirty tricks during De Gaulle's rule.

At its height in recent years, all-time staff "directors" and could call on 23,000 "correspondents" ranging from dedicated Gaullist war veterans to the most violent thugs in the Marseilles underground, according to Calzi.

Foccart's men were placed in key positions on development boards and agencies channeling government funds to Black Africa, giving them life-and-death powers over the weakest regimes and, it is often said, the chance to gather large kickbacks from cooperative regimes for SAC's treasury and that of the Gaullist Party generally.

SAC frequently intervened to pluck criminals from prison for important missions like the Argoud kidnaping and a number of murders Calzi pins on SAC operatives. He charges that drug operations, holdups and blackmail were routine ways for SAC to build up its treasury and to reward criminals for political operations.

4.—The General Information (RG) section of the national police has frequently worked closely with all three of the other services. Its primary mission is internal political espionage. It appears to be the least trusted of the intelligence services, partly because it is highly politicized without having declared exclusive allegiance to De Gaulle and his successors.

Following the established tradition of the pre-De Gaulle era, agents appear not to be above trying to curry favor with opposition groups of today that might be in power tomorrow.

"Sure, we knew the RG was spying on us during the campaign," says a Socialist

Party official of the 1974 presidential elections. Candidate Francois "Mitterrand" always had the radio playing in his office and the blinds drawn when we discussed campaign plans. Anyway, we were getting information

continued

from the RG, too, so the regime could not be too confident of its information on us."

But a more expert and detached observer of that campaign recalled: "Yes, the Socialists were getting a little information, but they couldn't have been getting much because an RG agent infiltrated their top planning staff and they didn't know it until it came out in the papers."

A ministry of interior official described the section's functions "as a kind of public opinion poll, that's all. They are just there to let the government know what the people are thinking politically, so we can have a good idea of what we should do."

NEXT: How The Chinese Spy